



***Seeing Improvement: A Guide to Visiting
Schools That Use Effective Whole School
Improvement Models and Promising
Practices***



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About this guide

This guide was developed by the Comprehensive School Reform Quality (CSRQ) Center in cooperation with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and is adapted from the AFT's *Seeing Progress: A Guide to Visiting Schools Using Promising Programs*, which is available online at <http://www.aft.org/topics/school-improvement/downloads/seeing.pdf>. The CSRQ Center thanks leaders and staff from AFT who generously contributed to the creation of this document.

Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center

The CSRQ Center is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education through a Comprehensive School Reform Quality Initiative Grant (S332B030012). The CSRQ Center is operated by the American Institutes for Research (AIR).

The mission of the CSRQ Center is to provide timely and reliable tools and technical assistance to support urban and rural educators and education decision makers in choosing the highest quality comprehensive school reform (CSR) program to meet locally defined needs. The CSRQ Center promises to help raise student achievement and improve other important student outcomes for millions of America's children by helping education decision makers identify and apply "what works" in the area of CSR.

To meet its mission, the CSRQ Center produces reports and makes them widely available; develops partnerships with communities and education and policy organizations; and provides technical assistance to selected states, districts, and schools. The CSRQ Center has several reports and services that are available on its Web site (<http://www.csrq.org>), including:

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- **CSRQ Center Report on Elementary School CSR Models.** This report offers a scientifically based, consumer-friendly review of the effectiveness and quality of 22 widely adopted elementary school CSR models.
 - **CSRQ Center Report on Education Service Providers.** This report offers a scientifically based, consumer-friendly review of the effectiveness and quality of seven widely adopted Education Service Providers.
 - **Works in Progress: A Report on Middle and High School Improvement Programs.** This report provides information on nearly 100 programmatic approaches that help to address 12 key issues facing middle and high schools, such as literacy and reading, English language learners, violence and bullying, and transition.
 - **Moving Forward: A Guide for Implementing CSR and Improvement Strategies.** This guide and accompanying workshop leads readers through an effective step-by-step process for implementing school reform and improvement strategies.
 - **Enhancing the Participation of Students With Disabilities in CSR Models.** This guide builds off of *CSRQ Center Reports* by providing information about specific model features that address the needs of students with disabilities. It also offers educators suggestions regarding strategies to enhance the engagement and progress of students with disabilities in school reform models.
 - **CSR Model Registry.** This online database allows model providers not reviewed in *CSRQ Center Reports* to submit nonevaluative information about their models to the Registry. Readers can search the Registry to find a model that may meet their local needs.

The American Institutes for Research

Since 1946, AIR—one of the nation’s largest nonpartisan, not-for-profit behavioral and social science research organizations—has engaged in thousands of research, evaluation, technical assistance, consulting, and communication projects that help to make research relevant to policymakers and practitioners. AIR’s overriding goal is to use the best science available to bring the most effective ideas and approaches to enhancing everyday life. The organization’s work spans a wide range of substantive areas: education, student assessment, international education, individual and organizational performance, health research and communication, human development, usability design and testing, employment equity, and statistical and research methods. AIR conducts its work within a culture and philosophy of strict independence, objectivity, and nonpartisanship. Given the variety of work that AIR conducts, rigorous institutional safeguards have been established to guarantee that any potential conflict of interest is avoided. For additional information about AIR, visit <http://www.air.org>.

Introduction

For years, teachers, administrators, parents, and others have struggled to find ways to turn around low-performing public schools. These efforts have been intensified by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 and its focus on reform that is based on evidence and on accountability that is based on results.

Under NCLB, states must develop a statewide accountability system that ensures each local educational agency makes adequate yearly progress (AYP). AYP is measured by objectives for achievement for all students and for specific subgroups, such as, but not limited to, racial/ethnic minorities and students with disabilities. Schools that do not meet AYP over several consecutive years are put on notice that they must do better and that they may face corrective action ranging from the required provisions of supplemental services and school choice to a complete school restructuring. Restructuring calls for an alternative governance arrangement, such as reopening as a public charter school, replacing all or most staff, implementing a new curriculum(s), and/or initiating a state takeover. Each year since NCLB was enacted, a significant number of schools have failed to meet AYP goals.¹

Decision makers are likely to consider using whole school improvement models or promising practices to transform schools that fail to meet AYP. Many educators feel bombarded by claims that specific models or practices will improve student achievement and bring success to struggling schools. Educators often ask questions about how these models and practices are different from the fads that have come and gone.

This guide will help you answer questions about choosing an evidence-based approach and adopting promising practices to improve your school. In addition, it will help you plan a visit to a school that already uses whole school improvement approaches and/or promising practices so that you can see for yourself whether they are bringing the improvements that you desire.

We begin this guide with a review of evidence-based approaches; why a school would consider adopting an approach, where evidence on various approaches can be found; how to choose an evidence-based approach; and how a school visit could guide the choice of a particular approach. Page 7 provides a list of resources that can support the decision-making process. If your school has already chosen an approach and would like to arrange a visit, you may choose to go directly to page 8 where a detailed discussion about a school visit begins.

Why should the adoption of evidence-based approaches be the foundation for improvement efforts at my school?

The school-level adoption and effective implementation of evidence-based whole school improvement models and promising practices are driven by the recognition that improvement efforts are complex, time consuming, and require a significant commitment of effort and resources. Therefore, decision makers want to feel comfortable that their choice of an approach results in improved student achievement.

¹ In both the 2003–2004 and 2004–2005 school years, approximately 25% of U.S. schools (about 20,000 schools) did not meet AYP (Olson, L. (2005, September 7). Defying predictions, state trends prove mixed on schools making NCLB targets. *Education Week*, pp. 1, 26–27). Approximately the same number of schools are predicted to not meet AYP in 2005–2006.

Many schools that adopt a whole school improvement approach choose an external model to provide a research-based, replicable set of practices. External models are offered by a variety of service providers and are meant to be blueprints to help a school make improvements in a number of areas. Most of these models do not leave schools to implement the reforms alone. Instead, the models typically provide materials, professional development, step-by-step technical assistance, and support that schools need to make progress and maintain improvement. By combining promising practices with ongoing support, struggling schools are now better equipped to sustain improvements, outlast fads, and achieve at high levels.

Some districts and schools take on the task of developing and implementing across-the-board reforms themselves. In these cases, district- or school-level teams create their own blueprints, by putting together promising practices, to meet their own local needs and to make schoolwide improvements.

Q: *What is a promising practice?*

A practice that shows promise in improving student achievement based on the best research available that meets established evidence criteria.

Q: *What is whole school improvement?*

According to the U.S. Department of Education, whole school improvement is a comprehensive reform strategy that meets the needs of *all* students by improving *all* school structures that target student learning.* Most whole school improvement models include a needs assessment, a formal commitment to specific goals to meet identified needs, a comprehensive action plan, and a process for reviewing progress toward meeting goals. For more information on whole school improvement, see *Designing Schoolwide Programs: Non-Regulatory Guidance* at <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/designingswpguid.doc>.

* U.S. Department of Education. (2006, March). *Designing schoolwide programs: Non-Regulatory guidance*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved June 8, 2006, from <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/designingswpguid.doc>

But no school—especially one that is struggling—should be expected to find success by reinventing the wheel. Research and evidence, when combined with sound professional judgment and effective implementation, can lead the way toward solid and sustained improvement. A reliance on research helps to satisfy NCLB’s requirement that school improvement efforts be grounded in scientifically based research. More importantly, it helps to meet the urgently felt need on the part of educators and policymakers to ensure that their efforts improve the lives of children.

How can I find evidence about improvement approaches?

Even when educators and decision makers have committed to the adoption of improvement approaches that have track records of effectiveness, they are often challenged to find, interpret, and apply relevant research. Fortunately, a number of efforts are underway to improve the quantity and quality of research, make it more relevant to educators, and ensure that it is available in a timely manner and in easily accessible formats and language.

To this end, the CSRQ Center has produced reports that offer a scientifically based, consumer-friendly review of the effectiveness and quality of whole school improvement models. These reports can be found at the CSRQ Center's Web site: <http://www.csrq.org>. Likewise, the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) provides education decision makers with a central, trusted source of scientific evidence of what works in education (<http://www.whatworks.ed.gov>). WWC systematically searches for, evaluates, and reports on evidence of effectiveness of promising practices, programs, and products. In fall 2006, a U.S. Department of Education effort, the No Child Left Behind Promising Practices Initiative (PPI), will begin disseminating evidence-based promising practices in the field of education and offering tools and technical assistance to help educators implement these practices effectively. The goal is to help more of our nation's children reach proficient and advanced levels of performance as defined by No Child Left Behind. Although the initiative does not yet have a URL, information about the PPI will soon be available on the U.S. Department of Education's Web site: <http://www.ed.gov>.

How can I choose the evidence-based approach that is the best match for my school?

Choosing the right whole school improvement model or promising practice for a school is a lot like finding the right approach for dealing with a troubling medical condition. Like physicians, educators have to analyze the symptoms, diagnose the problems, and use their knowledge of possible treatments (schoolwide models, evidence-based practices) to prescribe a treatment. Educators, then, move beyond the role of a physician as they daily apply the chosen approach until the problem is resolved.

Seeing Improvement

In October 2005, the Public Broadcasting Service aired "Making Schools Work," a 2-hour documentary that examined various approaches that schools are currently using to raise student achievement, including CSR models, such as the Comer School Development Program and Success For All. The documentary is accompanied by a discussion guide that helps schools to answer such questions as:

- Would a prescriptive reform approach or a more flexible model best meet the needs of your school?
- Would your school's staff embrace a collaborative decision-making process through leadership teams?
- What are the academic and social needs of your students and will this school improvement approach enable all students to learn?
- Does the school improvement approach provide teachers with strategies to increase and maintain student engagement?
- How will the approach improve the quality of instruction?
- Does the approach include strategies for assessing student achievement and tracking student progress?

A transcript of the documentary and the discussion guide are available on the Web at <http://www.pbs.org/makingschoolswork/>.

A careful planning process should go into selecting a school improvement approach or a promising practice. To ensure the success of any improvement plan, everyone who will be affected should be committed to the plan from the start. Therefore, schools or districts should

consider establishing a school improvement planning team whose members represent key people or groups who will be involved in the school improvement efforts.

Effective school improvement planning teams often include teachers, paraprofessionals, school support staff members, union representatives (if applicable), parents, school administrators, and district representatives. These teams are frequently responsible for creating a school's improvement plans, which may include selecting an external whole school improvement model or implementing an integrated set of promising practices. Creating a sustainable plan that involves all aspects of the school and involves the whole community may take as long as a full year. (See *Appendix A for more detailed suggestions on creating a planning team.*)

Before selecting an external model or a promising practice, the planning team should assess its school's needs. Once a school's most pressing problems have been identified, school staff should match those needs with approaches that show promise.

It seems that more school improvement approaches emerge each day—with each approach having unique features and offering promises of increased student success. Making sense of these claims and sifting through research can be confusing.

Sam Stringfield, an expert in the education field, suggests that the key to selecting a whole school improvement model or promising practice is considering the choice to be “an important and complicated consumer decision.”² To make an informed consumer choice, educators need objective and in-depth information about available approaches. When considering a reform approach, educators should consider using and trying to answer the following questions:

- Has the approach been proven to be effective in helping *all* students acquire the skills and/or knowledge they need to successfully perform at high academic standards? In what kinds of schools has this model worked best?
- Has the approach been proven to be effective in improving additional nonachievement outcomes, such as student discipline, student attendance, school climate, and retention and promotion rates?
- Does the approach help to improve the school's level of family and community involvement?
- Has the approach or the design of the model been developed based on research?
- Does the approach include necessary support structures—professional development, materials, capacity building, and technical assistance—to ensure successful implementation?

Resources are now available to help answer these questions. For example, *CSRQ Center Reports* is a series of reviews of whole school improvement models and education service providers. These reviews are available on the Web at <http://www.csrq.org>. Each review offers basic information about the model, including the model's mission and focus, year introduced in schools, grade levels served, number of schools served, and costs. The reviews also offer detailed descriptions of the model's components and evaluate evidence in five

² Stringfield, S. (1998, Fall). Choosing Success. *American Educator*, p. 1. Retrieved June 7, 2006, from http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/fall98/ChoosingSuccess.pdf

categories: positive effects on student achievement; positive effects on additional outcomes; positive effects on parent, family, and community involvement; link between research and the model's design; and services and support to schools to enable successful implementation.

Choosing an Approach and Planning for Success

- *CSRQ Center Reports* offers scientifically based, consumer-friendly reviews of the effectiveness and quality of widely adopted CSR models and education service providers. These reports are available on the CSRQ Center's Web site at <http://www.csrq.org/reports.asp>.
- *Works in Progress: A Report on Middle and High School Improvement Programs* provides information on nearly 100 programmatic approaches that help to address 12 key issues facing middle and high schools, such as literacy and reading, English language learners, violence and bullying, and transition. This report is available on the CSRQ Center's Web site at <http://www.csrq.org/reports.asp>.
- *Moving Forward: A Guide for Implementing CSR and Improvement Strategies* leads readers through an effective step-by-step process for adopting and implementing school reform and improvement strategies. This document is available on the CSRQ Center's Web site at <http://www.csrq.org/resources.asp>.
- *The School Improvement KnowledgeBase* helps schools take specific steps toward improvement as required under NCLB. This resource offers guidance on conducting needs assessments, communicating with key stakeholders, and developing and implementing an improvement plan. It is available on the Web at <http://www.helpforschools.com/sikb/index.shtml>.
- *What Works Clearinghouse* was established in 2002 by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. WWC provides educators, policymakers, researchers, and the public with a central and trusted source of scientific evidence of what works in education. For more information, visit <http://www.whatworks.ed.gov> for more information.
- *Best Practices of High Performing School Systems* was developed by the National Center for Educational Accountability. It provides a framework for identifying and organizing promising practices of high-performing schools and a database of promising practices and evidence of their effectiveness. This resource is available on the Web at <http://www.just4kids.org/bestpractice/index.cfm>.
- *Making Good Choices: A Guide for Schools and Districts* was created by The North Central Regional Education Lab. The guide assists decision makers in choosing the appropriate CSR model. It is available on the Web at <http://www.ncrel.org/csri/choices/makegood/app.htm>.
- *Comprehensive School Reform: Research-Based Strategies to Achieve High Standards* was developed by WestEd. It helps administrators redesign schools by providing a guide to planning, implementing, and sustaining reform efforts. For more information, visit <http://www.wested.org/cs/we/view/rs/414>.
- *Enhancing the Participation of Students with Disabilities in CSR Models* builds off of *CSRQ Center Reports* by providing information about specific model features that address the needs of students with disabilities. It also offers educators suggestions regarding strategies to enhance the engagement and progress of students with disabilities in school reform models. This report is available on the CSRQ Center's Web site at <http://www.csrq.org/resources.asp>.
- *Designing Schoolwide Programs: Non-Regulatory Guidance* offers information about using schoolwide programs. The report includes steps for conducting a needs assessment, creating a comprehensive plan, and evaluating implementation on an annual basis. It is available on the Web at <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/designingswpguid.doc>.

How can a school visit help me make a better choice?

Visiting a school that uses an external whole school improvement model or promising practice is an important “seeing-is-believing test,” according to Stringfield.³ Although literature and phone conversations can be useful, visiting classrooms and talking with staff, students, and community members provide opportunities for you to gain a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of a particular approach. By examining the approach in action, you can compare the challenges facing your school with the efforts being implemented in other schools.

Doing Your Homework

Once you have decided that visiting a school that uses promising practices is a good idea, you need to do your homework to make the visit happen. (See *Appendix B* for a checklist that summarizes the following planning process.)

Who will plan the visit?

Once established, your school improvement planning team should first assess the school’s needs and generate a list of whole school improvement models and promising practices that may meet such needs.

Once your team has identified one or more approaches for further research and consideration, at least one person should be appointed the visit coordinator. This person(s) will be responsible for completing all calls, logistics, and plans for the visit. If your team identifies a whole school improvement model as a potential reform solution, then the visit coordinator should contact the model developer. If your team identifies a promising practice as a potential solution, then the visit coordinator may use the National Center on Educational Accountability's (NCEA) Best Practices of High Performing School Systems Web site (www.just4kids.org/bestpractice/index.cfm) to gather more information about the practice and learn how schools and districts are implementing the approach. The Building Blocks Initiative (<http://www.buildingblocks.org>), run by Mass Insight Education since 1999, is another resource for gathering information about promising practices.

Q: How can I contact a whole school improvement model?

Model contact information is listed in *CSRQ Center Reports*. Also, the CSRQ Center’s online Model Registry allows models not reviewed in the Center’s reports to submit information on the model. This Registry and *CSRQ Center Reports* can be found at <http://www.csrq.org>.

Many of the models’ Web sites include a guide for school visits and directions for planning and scheduling an overview presentation on the model at your school.

Which school(s) should I visit?

If your school decides to observe a whole school improvement model(s), then call the model(s) under consideration. Get materials about the model, data, and a list of schools. Explain that your school or district is considering the model and ask a representative from the model to send you materials on the model. Share this information with your team. Also, ask the representative for a list of all schools that use the model and for a list of model schools that

³ Ibid, p. 2.

accept visitors (particularly schools in your area). The Web sites of some models provide contact information and lists of schools.

If your school decides to observe a promising practice, then gather information about the approach, its effectiveness, and schools or districts that are implementing the practice. The Practice/Evidence Finder on NCEA's Best Practices of High Performing School Systems Web site (<http://www.just4kids.org/bestpractice>) is a good source of such information. In the future, the U.S. Department of Education's PPI will be able to provide similar information about promising practices. In the future, the U.S. Department of Education's PPI will be able to provide similar information about promising practices.

During this information gathering process, the visit coordinator should seek independent evaluations of the model or promising practice and student achievement data on the reform approach. Sam Stringfield warns that “the absence of adequate data is just as damning as data pointing consistently in the wrong direction . . . any group asking school people to spend tax dollars, and the time and work of teachers and others, must understand that its word that a program will work is not enough.”⁴ Resources, such as *CSRQ Center Reports*, can also be helpful when reviewing and gathering data on a model's effectiveness.

Although summaries of overall evidence of effectiveness and quality are crucial to solid decision making, they can also be misleading. For example, researchers have frequently noted that most models vary in their effectiveness from school to school. That is, in some schools they work well and in others, they hardly work at all.⁵ Thus, decision makers should keep in mind that even those approaches with promising evidence of effectiveness will not work if poorly implemented.

Using the list of all schools, make calls to several schools. If your school or district lacks the financial resources to make one or more school visits, then such calls will be essential to your research and planning process. Work with your planning team to decide who will make the calls and to generate a set of questions about the approach and the school. (*Page 19 contains suggestions on questions to ask.*)

Use the Internet to gather information on schools and their programs and student achievement results. Information on schools is often available on the Web sites of local districts and state educational agencies and at School Match: School Research and Data Consulting Services (<http://schoolmatch.com>) and School Matters (<http://www.schoolmatters.com>). Schools may also provide this information. Save any documents that you receive from a school—you will use this information later to plan the content of your visit. You can use this information to generate interest in the visit and recruit team members for the visit. One week before the visit, all team members should receive copies of this in an information packet (*see “Are You Ready?”*).

Create a list of possible schools to visit. Depending on budget and interests, your team should consider the following: Is the school close to you? Are the school's students similar to the students in your school or district? Has the school just begun using the model or practice or has the approach been in place for some time? Is the school successful or is it still

⁴ Ibid, p. 3.

⁵ Borman, G. D., Hewes, G. M., Overman, L. T., & Brown, S. (2002). *Comprehensive school reform and student achievement: A meta-analysis*. Baltimore, MD: Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk.

struggling? Consider visiting multiple schools to see how or if the approach varies at different stages of implementation and from school to school.

Who will go with me?

Bring a team. Visiting with a team of a few carefully selected members can help build consensus and collaboration in your school or district. A team visit helps everyone develop a common understanding of the approach and can help your team work together to choose the best option for your school or district. You might use the information you have gathered on the approach and the school you'll be visiting to generate interest and recruit members for the visit team. The visit team should include members of your school improvement planning team and may include other representatives from key groups that will be involved in, or affected by, the reform. Consider inviting one or more of the following people:

- Administrative association representative
- Community representative
- Counselor
- Curriculum advisor
- Facilitator or coach
- Local foundation representative
- Local business representative
- Local government representative
- Paraprofessional or teaching aide
- Parent representative
- Principal
- School board member
- School support staff member
- Superintendent (or designee)
- Teacher
- Teaching association representative

Q: *Should we invite the press?*

Media coverage of your visit may generate additional excitement in school and demonstrate to the community your commitment to improvement.

Do not invite the media if:

- Your team is in the tentative, early stages of the selection/planning process.
- Your team is uncertain about the quality of the school that will be visited.
- Your team is divided or uncertain about a particular reform process.
- Your team's school or district is engaged in any controversies, which although unrelated, might deflect public attention from the improvement process.

Invite the media if:

- Your team is in the final stages of the selection and planning process.
- Your team is confident about the quality of the school that will be visited.
- Your team is unified around a particular reform process.
- Your team is ready to spotlight promising practices.

Identify potential dates. Once you know who is going on the visit, pinpoint several dates that would be possible for all team members. Remember, there are times when you

should *not* visit, for example, at the start or end of the school year, during student testing, and around holidays or major school vacations. Once you have scheduled a date with the school, confirm that date with all members of team, per next step.

Send the school a letter or e-mail to confirm your visit and to initiate planning the structure of your visit. (See *Appendix C for a sample letter.*) In the letter, you should:

- **Ask the school to send you pertinent materials on the school, its community, its improvement plans, the school's program(s), and the school's results.** Additionally, schools or districts should be able to provide you with a complete school report for the past 3 years. The school profile should include information on attendance rates, student mobility, staff mobility, principal turnover, staff qualifications, student demographics, and discipline referral rates. The profile must include student achievement data (standardized test scores) from at least the past 3 years. If possible, ask the school or district for data from the year before they adopted the approach and for each consecutive year to date. You may have gathered some of this information from the Internet.
- **Ask which of your potential dates will work best.** Provide the list of possible dates that your team has identified and ask which date works best for the school.
- **Provide the names and titles of members of the team that will be visiting.** Include members' job titles (i.e., teacher, principal, paraprofessional, parent, etc.) to give the school a sense of the audience and what each visitor's particular concerns may be.
- **Identify specific questions or concerns that your team has about the approach or the school.** If members of the team have already pinpointed specific features of the approach they would like to observe or specific persons they would like to speak with,

Q: Getting There—Who Pays?

Most schools or districts are able to use Title I, professional development, school improvement, or discretionary funds to pay for the visit. Check with your local superintendent and school board for funding possibilities. Local nonprofit foundations, reform groups, and business or community organizations may be another source of funds—particularly if a representative of such a group participates on your school or district planning team. Also, most states offer funds for school improvement or professional development. Ask your state superintendent's office or Title I coordinator for more information.

Q: Who Stays?

If you visit a school that is more than a 1-day drive away, then remember that you will have to make travel arrangements and reservations at a nearby hotel or motel for all members of the visit team. In this case, your team will have to make several decisions:

- Will team members make arrangements independently or will the visit coordinator handle all arrangements?
- How will team members get to the school?
- Will ground transportation (e.g., a bus or van) be required?
- Who will provide the transportation?

Remember that the school you visit may be able to recommend nearby accommodations and transportation options to suit your budget. Under certain conditions, you may be able to receive a government rate for hotels or motels. You may wish to check with your district or school's financial office on such matters.

then list the features and persons in the letter or e-mail. Note: If your team has not yet identified a specific set of goals for the visit, then carefully review the next two steps of this guide. Once you have completed these steps and identified goals, share your team's goals with the school that you will be visiting.

- **Discuss any logistical questions.** These concerns might include questions about transportation, meals, or nearby hotels.
- **Provide your contact information.** Although you will be calling your liaison at the school to finalize all plans, you should at least provide a phone number and/or e-mail address where you can be reached in case the other school's staff has any questions or concerns.

What expectations should I have for the visit?

Work with your team to create a written set of expectations for the visit. Together, review your school's needs and create a list of issues or concerns that your team may have about the model or promising practice that you are going to observe during your visit. Use this list of concerns to help your team decide what to see and with whom to talk during the visit. Also, use the information that your team has gathered about the approach and the school you will be visiting to help plan the structure of your visit: Does the material describe aspects of the school or model or promising practice that you want to observe? Does the material raise questions about the school or model or promising practice that can be answered during your visit?

Evaluate the school's data carefully. If there is a shift in student test scores, then try to determine to what extent the results are tied to the model or promising practice or to other changes in the school or district. For example, a change in a school's scores could be tied to a turnover in school or district administration, shifts in demographics, or changes to assessment systems or other programs in the school. A move from open enrollment to a selective admissions program may also affect a school's performance. When you examine the school's data, look for any factors that may have influenced achievement and use this information to develop your expectations for the visit.

Finally, consider providing information about your team's expectations to the contact at the school you will be visiting. Sharing these goals may help you and your contact work together to plan the content of your visit.

What will I see? When?

Use your list of goals and the information that you have received about the model or promising practice and the school to determine what you want to observe. Work with the school contact to schedule your visit. The length of time you have to visit will determine how much you will be able to see and how in depth your observations will be. A typical visit usually begins with a tour of the school and a brief orientation with the school's administrators, teachers, and other staff. Your schedule should also allow ample time for classroom visits; discussions with staff, students, and program representatives; and more. Also, if your team plans to stay for lunch, be sure to check with the school and make special arrangements. (See *Appendix D for a sample agenda for a school visit.*)

To see teaching and learning in action, your team should try to observe at least one classroom and stay long enough to view a substantial amount of the lesson. Observing more than one classroom will allow your team to understand how different teachers have adapted to the improvement approach or promising practice. (See *pages 20 and 21 for tips on classroom observations.*)

Also, consider observing the following places:

- Library or resource center.
- Computer lab.
- Hallways between classes and/or cafeteria during lunch. This may help give you a sense of the school climate and will certainly be useful for you to observe if behavior management is a concern.
- Any special facilities at school (e.g., a teacher center or resource area, a book room for student curricular materials, a library of professional materials, parent center, discipline center, or guidance office).

Arrange the visit so that your team is able to observe unique features of the model or promising practice. For example, many schools now conduct 90-minute reading blocks, usually at the beginning of each day. If your team wants to see the instructional block, work with the school to schedule this into your visit.

How should the team be structured during the visit?

Assign every person on the team a specific set of responsibilities. Giving each team member a focus or role will help your team gain in-depth information on each area of concern. For instance, if your school is concerned with discipline or management, then be sure that one person on your team is focused solely on that issue. During the visit, that person fulfills this role by asking for a copy of the discipline code, talking to the person responsible for enforcing that code, watching student behavior in class, noting teachers' classroom management techniques, and observing behavior in hallways between classes. Try to match each team member's role with his/her interests and with your team's list of goals. Make certain that the team agrees on the role of each member. (*Appendix D includes a sample list of team roles.*)

Assign one team member to act as the team recorder during the visit. This person will be responsible for keeping all documents received from the school, recording the team's observations after the visit, and keeping notes on the team's action plans and ideas.

Q: Does the visit team represent everyone who will need to support the reform approach?

When assigning roles, you might find it is time to rethink the composition of your team. For example, some whole school improvement models involve every adult in the school—from administrators to teachers, specialists, and support staff. Each of these groups should be represented on your visit team if you will be visiting a school implementing that type of model or promising practice.

With whom should the team meet and speak?

Use your team's list of goals to decide whom your team will meet and speak with during the visit. Plan the context of these meetings carefully. Try to get as many perspectives as possible. Consider talking with teachers, union representatives (if applicable), students, the principal, support staff, parents, program staff, school facilitators, and community or business partners. Remember to schedule discussion time after your classroom observation or at the end of the visit to meet with staff and ask questions about what you observed. Note: The role of support staff will vary depending on the whole school improvement model or promising practice that you observe. Ask your school contact about support staff's role in the whole school improvement effort. If these faculty members are involved in the effort, then plan to observe and/or talk with these staff members during your visit.

When planning the format for these discussions, think about how formal or informal you want these conversations to be. Would you prefer a scheduled block of time with certain people? Will you also try to spark an informal conversation during an appropriate free moment? If you plan to schedule a meeting, will it be with an individual or a group of people? Who will be included in the group? Consider how you can create a risk-free environment to encourage open and candid conversation. For example, teachers will generally feel more open without administrators present. Work with your school contact on these plans and make arrangements so that each person you want to meet with will be available during your visit.

What questions should I ask?

Once you've decided what you would like to see and with whom you would like to meet and speak, work with your team to compose a list of questions to ask your hosts. The questions should address your team's concerns about the model or practice that you are considering and should focus on implementation, costs, effectiveness, school organization, and school goals for improvement. Give each team member a copy of the team's list of questions. (See page 19 for a list of sample questions.)

How should I follow up?

Before the visit, work together to identify next steps that should be taken after the visit. First, plan to meet with your team immediately after the visit for a debriefing session. During this session, your team should share observations, identify outstanding practices, pinpoint areas of concern, and plan to gather more information to answer any lingering questions.

Second, your team should consider possible next steps in the improvement process. Before you go, think about how you might report back to your school or district on the findings from the visit. Plan to prepare a written report and share your observations with your school and community.

Are You Ready?

One week before the visit, send a briefing packet to each team member. Assemble this packet using the background information that you gathered in earlier steps. Include information about the school (e.g., newspaper stories, school brochures, and school evaluations) and the whole school improvement approach or promising practice (e.g., description, implementation information, results).

Also provide directions to the school, a tentative agenda or brief description of how the visit will be structured, and a list of team members and their assigned roles for the visit. Finally, suggest a place for the team to meet immediately before the visit (usually at the school) and a place to meet afterward to discuss and plan (e.g., a nearby restaurant or hotel). If each team member is familiar with this information before the day of the visit, then you may be able to cut down on introductory or overview activities on the day of the visit and spend more time on in-depth observations and discussions. *(See Appendix D for a sample visit briefing packet.)*

One week before the visit, confirm all arrangements. Call the school to confirm the visit agenda. Ask where to park, because you may need special passes. Make sure that all travel arrangements have been made. Double check with team members to ensure that they have read all of the background materials, have directions to the school, and have a schedule of the visit. Remind the visit team when and where to meet before and after the visit.

One or 2 days before the visit, meet with your visit team for a final review of team plans and roles during the visit.

The Visit

When you get to the school, do a last minute check to ensure that everyone is clear about his/her responsibilities during the visit. As you visit, each team member should focus on his/her assigned role.

Use the set of questions your team created before the visit to guide your observations. Consider the following:

- **Classrooms.** Are students engaged? Are the lessons challenging? Are the teachers comfortable with the model or practice? What special materials are being used? Are there computers in the classroom? Are they well used? What, if any, differences are

there across classrooms? Would this approach be appropriate for your school? (See pages 20 and 21 for classroom observations tips.)

- **Library.** What are the materials like? Is the library well used? Would your school's library meet the needs of the model or approach?
- **Computer lab.** How is it staffed? Who has access to the computers? What are the computers used for? Are the computers a required component of the approach? Who staffs the lab? Do the teachers and/or paraprofessionals receive training? Can your school accommodate this technology?
- **Hallways between classes and/or cafeteria during lunch.** Is the environment safe and orderly? Are students well behaved? How do administrators and staff manage these times?
- **Facilitator.** (Some schools will have an onsite school improvement facilitator who is employed by the whole school improvement model or by the district to help the school implement the model or practice that you are considering.) Who employs the facilitator? What is the facilitator's role in the school? How often is he/she in the school? How long after implementation will this facilitator work in the school?
- **Support staff (such as Title I and special education teachers).** What role do these staff members play in the improvement approach and the school? Are support staff members included in staff development? Does support staff feel properly trained for their positions?
- **Any special facilities at the school, such as a teacher center, parent center, resource area, or counseling office.** Are these a required part of the approach? How did the school establish them? What resources are required to implement and maintain them? How are they used? Does the staff find them useful? Would this be possible and helpful at your school?

Look for appropriate, unplanned moments to ask a question or gain insight from a student or staff member. You may find a free moment in the hallway or in a staff room to privately speak to a student or staff member in a nondisruptive and more informal manner. These unplanned moments, when the students or staff members are not "on display," often allow visitors to get candid responses that provide useful insight into the school or approach.

Remember to consider how this school operates as a whole. Are there other initiatives taking place at the school? Do these initiatives complement the model or practice or detract from it? Does the staff recommend additional initiatives to supplement the model or practice? Would your school need to consider additional initiatives to make the approach work?

Q: What should we ask staff of schools using whole school improvement models or promising practices?

Note: Staff members will answer these questions differently based on their experiences and roles within the school. Keep this in mind as you try to appropriately target questions to school faculty members and administrators.*

- How long has your school been using this approach, and why did your school select this particular model or practice?
- In your opinion, what are the strengths of this model or practice?
- What are the major challenges of adopting this model or practice?
- Has your school made any adaptations to the original design that was provided by the developer? Do you have an example? Why did your school decide to make that particular adaptation?
- How did you begin implementing this approach in your school? What do you think were the benefits and disadvantages of your decisions or implementation?
- How has the implementation of this approach changed your day-to-day work in the school?
- Did you receive extra assistance or resources to help your school implement the model or practice? Please describe.
- Please describe any professional development that you attended to implement the approach. Who provided the professional development? What are your feelings about this experience? Are professional development opportunities still available to you? Who provides them?
- What is the role of support staff in the model or practice? Are these staff members included in whole school staff development or do they receive separate training?
- How does this approach fit into state or district requirements for your school?
- In your experience, is this model or practice equally effective for all of your students or have you found it to be more or less effective with some (i.e., special needs students)? If there is a difference, what do you think explains this difference?
- Do you think that this approach would be equally effective for all types of schools and districts?
- How have you reacted or adapted to the model or practice? Have your feelings about this approach changed since you started using it? Do you think most of the staff shares your feelings? Please explain.
- Has this approach either helped staff work more collaboratively or created or exaggerated differences among staff? Please describe.
- Please describe the cost of the model or practice. Is the cost per pupil? If so, please specify how many students the cost covers. What are the extra costs associated with the model or promising practice for the first year of implementation? Are your school's costs the same as when you first started using this approach? If not, what is the same and what is different? Did costs include additional personnel (full and part time), materials (required and supplementary), and staff development (release time, stipend, travel/per diem, trainer, fees, other expenses)? Are any other costs involved?
- Has your school attempted to involve parents and the community in the improvement efforts? If so, how did you get them involved? Have these efforts been successful?
- What process do you follow to evaluate the effectiveness of the approach? Are these evaluations used to guide planning? If so, how are they used?
- Given a second chance, would you choose to adopt this model or practice? Have you learned lessons while using this approach that would lead you to do things differently?
- What, if any, steps are you planning for future reforms?

* Some sample questions have been adapted from American Institutes for Research. (1999). *An educators' guide to schoolwide reform*. Washington, DC: Author, p. G-4. Retrieved July 8, 2006, from http://www.aasa.org/issues_and_insights/district_organization/Reform/

Q: What should we look for during classroom observations?

Note: Use the following questions to help focus your classroom observations. You can also use these questions to guide discussions with staff after your observations and with your team after the visit.

Learning Environment

- Is the classroom environment safe and orderly?
- Is the classroom arrangement conducive to a variety of learning activities? For example, if students are expected to work in groups for part of the lesson and then make presentations to the class, is the classroom arrangement flexible enough to suit each activity easily, or is the arrangement too rigid or congested?
- Is the classroom comfortable and attractive? Do the classroom displays, bulletin boards, and other decorations reflect high expectations of behavior and achievement? Is the decoration of the classroom directly connected to the class curriculum and to student learning?
- Is a particular strategy, technique, or classroom arrangement part of the promising practice used in this school or is it an adaptation of that individual teacher or school? Was that method part of the development of school staff?
- Do the students appear engaged in the instruction and classroom activities? What strategies does the teacher use to foster student engagement?
- Do you feel welcome as a visitor in the classroom? Why or why not?

Instructional Strategies

- What are the objectives of the class or lesson? How are students made aware of these objectives? Are the objectives met?
- What does the teacher do to highlight important concepts in the lesson? Does this seem effective?
- How does the teacher encourage or discourage student participation? Does the teacher implement strategies that encourage all students to participate in the instructional activities? How does the teacher ask questions (i.e., what questioning techniques are being used)? What verbal or nonverbal cues does the teacher use?
- Does the teacher check for student understanding? When and how?
- Does the teacher use examples or special strategies to clarify concepts? Are these effective? Will they help students remember the concept?
- What kinds of activities and assignments are involved in the lesson: seatwork, groupwork, presentations, quizzes, discussions, or debates?
- Does the teacher use any special grouping arrangements? Is the instruction differentiated to meet diverse student needs?
- Does the teacher maximize use of instructional time? How is this done? Does the teacher maintain consistent instructional pacing that seems appropriate for the students?
- What is the role of support staff in the classroom? How do teachers and support staff coordinate their roles? Do they integrate their planning and work?

Q: What should we look for during classroom observations? (continued)

Student Performance

- What evidence of student learning is apparent? Try to look at samples of student work. Does the level of student work seem appropriate? Does it reflect high standards?
- Do the classroom activities reflect high expectations of achievement and behavior? How?
- How often and in what manner do the students interact with the teacher? With each other? Is this interaction positive? Are most student interactions productive or disruptive (be sure to separate the two)? What particular incidents support your opinion?
- What types of assessments are used in the classroom? Does the teacher use assessment data to guide instructional planning?
- Are all students engaged? Are all students participating? What are students' attitudes about the class or particular activities? How do the students demonstrate their attitudes? Is the teacher able to assess and respond appropriately and productively to their attitudes?

Classroom Management

- What routines and procedures does the teacher use to manage classroom activities (i.e., attendance, homework collection, bathroom requests, pencil sharpening, etc.)?
- How does the teacher manage student behavior? Does the teacher reinforce or reward positive behavior? What are the consequences for negative behavior?
- What is the role of paraprofessionals in classroom management?

Cross-Classroom Observations

- How has the approach affected the practices of each teacher?
- Do teachers use common techniques, practices, or materials? Are these features part of the promising practices that are used in the school?
- Does each teacher implement the approach in the same manner? If not, how does implementation vary by teacher? Does this variation positively or negatively affect the quality of the approach's implementation?
- Do teachers plan lessons collaboratively across grade levels or subject areas?

After the Visit: Debriefing

Meet immediately after the visit to share information and create a plan of action.

The team recorder should gather all documents, record team observations, and prepare a written report.

What did you think?

Team members should share observations about their assigned roles. Try to focus the conversation on goals or concerns that your team had identified before the visit.

Identify outstanding practices and areas of concern. What did each team member like or dislike about the model or practice that you are considering? Is the approach appropriate for your staff, students, and community? Is this an approach that you would recommend for adoption in your school or district? How would the approach fit into your school or district's strategic improvement plan? Do you need to know more about specific aspects of the school or approach? If so, how will you get this information: from the school or through research? Do you need to visit another site?

Contact the model and/or school with follow-up questions. Create a set of follow-up questions for the school and/or the model. Base the follow-up questions on your team's needs, identify one or more team members who will call the school, and establish a timeline for gathering and sharing this information with your team.

Note: If your team identifies a large number of follow-up questions for the model or the school, then you may need to gather this information before your team plans further action. (See *“Following Up: What’s The Plan?”*) If this is the case, then use part of your debriefing session to set a deadline for gathering information and to schedule a follow-up meeting so you can review this information and plan next steps.

Following Up: What’s the Plan?

Decide what your team will do with the knowledge that you gained during the visit. Work together to reach consensus on the whole school improvement approach or promising practices and to plan concrete next steps. Your team should decide how the group will report back to your school and/or district on the findings from your visit.

Prepare a written report and plan to share this report and your team’s impressions with school staff and community members. Sharing information with your school and community is an action that is too often overlooked. This step will help to gain support from the school and community for any further plans. This step is also essential to ensure the success of any next steps in the school improvement process. Your school improvement team should consider who will be affected by a decision that is based on your visit. How will you gain the support of these people? Consider informal conversations and a more formal presentation or debriefing session with members of key groups (e.g., school staff, parents, administrators, school board members, or other community groups). Decide who will present the information and to whom, how, and when. Who will distribute materials on the improvement approach: you or the school? How will you seek feedback?

Make recommendations about the improvement approach or promising practice that is under consideration. The recommendations that your team makes will vary according to your team’s plans and your team’s position on the model or promising practice. If your team is uniformly favorable to the approach, then you may recommend that staff be allowed to vote on adoption of the approach or to further explore its options. If your team’s position is mixed, then you might suggest follow-up and more research. Your team may also recommend researching a promising practice that would work well in conjunction with the model or promising practice that you observed during your visit. If your team is uniformly opposed to the improvement approach or promising practice, then you may suggest rejecting it entirely and searching for other approaches or practices.

Appendix A: Creating a Planning Team*

The Basics

Sustainable and successful school improvement requires collaboration from everyone involved. A collaborative environment is best achieved if teachers, administrators, students, parents, community members, and others participate in the school improvement process and develop a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for the success of the improvement approach.

To create an effective planning team, identify groups in your district that are stakeholders in your improvement efforts and list key people from each group who will participate in your planning team. Is there already an existing team or committee in your school or district that can serve as your planning team (i.e., a school improvement team or a site-based management council)? If so, be sure that each stakeholder group is represented by at least one person. If not, contact each group and invite its elected leader or encourage the group to elect a representative who can serve on your planning team.

Place a check mark next to any of the following groups that you will invite to participate in the planning team. List the individuals who have been elected to represent that group.

- Students: _____
- Parents: _____
- Teachers: _____
- Department chairpersons: _____
- Counselors: _____
- School administrators: _____
- School building association representative: _____
- Union leadership: _____
- School support staff: _____
- District administrators: _____
- School board members: _____
- State education agency staff: _____
- Local businesses and employers: _____
- Postsecondary education representatives: _____
- Other community members: _____

Together, team members should identify roles or responsibilities that each member can fulfill. Some members may fill more than one role. These roles might include:

- **Team leader.** Coordinates all aspects of the school improvement planning and delegates responsibilities. The team leader may also maintain the planning budget. The team leader is a respected school leader, whether it is a teacher or an administrator.

* Appendix A has been adapted from U.S. Department of Education. (2006, March). *Designing Schoolwide Programs: Non-Regulatory Guidance*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved June 8, 2006, from <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/designingswpguid.doc>.

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- **Assistant team leader.** Supports the team leader in logistics and planning. This person may be selected for special skills, such as having knowledge of federal programs, being an excellent negotiator or facilitator, or having experience as a curriculum developer.
 - **Data analyzer or coordinator.** Provides knowledge of assessments and analysis. This person leads the school or district data analysis and interpretation process.
 - **Facilitator.** Helps identify resources for planning and provides information on research-based practices and programs.
 - **School finance expert.** Provides information on school budget with respect to costs of possible improvement approaches. This person also supports the team leader in maintaining the planning budget.
 - **Technology expert.** Provides information on the school's capacity for technology with respect to possible improvement approaches. This person may also support the team by incorporating technology into logistics, budget, or communications plans.
 - **Teacher liaison.** Represents teachers' interests and provides information on classroom-specific issues, such as student needs, school curriculum, and teacher needs or suggestions. This person keeps staff informed of the team's plans and seeks their input.
 - **Support staff liaison.** Represents support staff's interests and provides information about roles, needs, skills, and suggestions. This person keeps staff informed of the team's plans and seeks their input.
 - **Student liaison.** Represents students' interests and provides information about student needs and suggestions. Given the chance, this person keeps students informed of the team's plans and seeks peer input.
 - **Special education liaison.** Provides information about special education programs and regulations within the school or district with respect to possible improvement approaches.
 - **Team recorder or communications chairperson.** Facilitates written communication from the planning team to the school or district. This communication may include maintaining minutes of meetings, writing brief newsletters, gathering or producing information on possible whole school improvement approaches or promising practices, and producing the final written plan. This person should be experienced in writing and/or public relations.
 - **School visit coordinator.** Coordinates all logistics for a visit to a school that uses the approach or promising practice under consideration by the planning team.

Issues To Consider Before Planning

- How will the planning team develop a collaborative working relationship? What activities might the team use to transform members from a collection of individuals into a true team?
- How will the planning team coordinate with other committees in the school or district?
- What autonomy does the schoolwide planning team have to make decisions or recommendations? How will you obtain final approval of your reform plan?
- How will the planning team communicate with the groups that it represents and with the school or district?

Appendix B: Checklist for Planning a School Visit

At least 8–12 weeks before the visit:

- Assemble a school improvement planning team. This team will do most of the initial work.
- Appoint at least one person to act as the visit coordinator.
- Work together to assess your school or district's needs.
- Search through publications and resources to evaluate possible models or promising practices for your school or district.
- Create a tentative list of approaches or promising practices that your school or district may consider.
- Gather information about promising practices from NCEA's Best Practices Web site or contact model(s) under consideration to:
 - Gather information, materials, and student achievement data.
 - Gather a list of schools and visitation sites.
 - Share the materials with your team members.
 - Call several schools on the list of schools to gather more information.
 - Create a list of possible schools to visit.
 - Consider contacting the local teacher or administrator's association in the districts that you want to visit.
- Pinpoint at least one site to visit and contact the school.
- Get final permission for your visit from administrators at the school or district that you will be visiting.
- Make sure all appropriate forms are completed.
- Determine who will visit the school by assembling a visit team that is composed of key people or groups from your school or district.

At least 6–8 weeks before the visit:

- Identify several dates for the visit that are possible for your visit team.
- Send the school administrator a letter or e-mail that
 - Asks the school to send information about the school, its community, its improvement plans, its promising practice or improvement approach(es), and its results (including student achievement data).
 - Asks which of your team's dates will work best for that school.
 - Lists the people who will be visiting. Be sure to specify names and job titles.
 - Identifies specific questions or concerns that your team has about the school or improvement approach.
 - Discusses logistics, such as transportation, meals, or nearby hotel accommodations
 - Provides your contact information (e.g., phone number and e-mail address).
- Work with your team to review your school's needs and to create a list of goals for your visit.
- Determine what your team hopes to see, with whom you want to meet and speak, and when.
- Contact the school administrator to finalize the date of your visit and to begin scheduling the content of your visit.
- Assign each team member a role or focus for the visit.
- Ask one team member to act as the recorder during and after the visit.
- Compose a list of questions to use during the visit and distribute this list to team members.
- Contact the school administrator to finalize the date of your visit and your visit agenda.
- Plan to meet for a debriefing session immediately after the visit.
- Identify possible next steps to take after the visit, perhaps deciding how your team will use findings from the visit and how your team will report back to the school and community.
- Confirm that all team members have completed all travel arrangements necessary for the visit
- Arrange coverage or substitute teachers for the day(s) of the visit

One or 2 weeks in advance:

- Send a briefing packet to each team member that includes:
 - A copy of background or school information.
 - A schedule of the day's events.
 - Directions to the school.
 - A list of each team member's role.
 - Information on when and where to meet immediately before the visit.
 - Information on when and where the debriefing session will take place after the visit.
- Contact the school to confirm all arrangements.

The day before:

- Hold a final meeting to review team plans and roles and to make sure that team members have necessary materials.
- Contact the school to confirm the date of visit and the time of arrival.

The visit:

- Try to get as many perspectives as possible by talking to administrators, teachers, other staff, association representatives (if applicable), students, principals, parents, program staff, school facilitators, and community or business partners.
- Use the questions that your team identified before the visit to generate discussion.
- Observe classrooms, libraries, computer labs, hallways (between classes), and special facilities at the school.
- Use the tips for classroom observation to guide you during the visit (*see page 19*) and following the classroom observation (*see page 20*).
- Take notes when possible.

Immediately after the visit:

- Meet immediately after the visit to share observations and create a plan of action.
- Keep running notes of this meeting (usually the team recorder's duties).
- Have each team member share observations about his/her assigned role.
- List outstanding practices and areas of concern that were observed.
- Use your notes, the tips for classroom observations, and the sample questions to guide your discussion (*see page 20*).
- Identify follow-up questions about unclear aspects of the school or improvement approach. Decide whom your team will call for this information and assign appropriate people to make those calls.
- Schedule a meeting to discuss the answers to your follow-up questions.
- Plan follow-up actions: What will your team do with the knowledge gained during the visit? How will you gain support for any next steps? Prepare a written report and plan to make it available to the school and community. You might schedule a formal presentation for key people or groups from your school or district, invite a model representative to your school or district, or visit another school that uses the same model or promising practice.

Following-up after the visit:

- Carry out your follow-up plans. Remember to seek input and consensus from staff, students, parents, community members, and other key groups in your school or district.
- Decide as a group whether you will recommend (a) a staff vote on adoption of the model or promising practice(s), (b) further exploration of the improvement approaches, (c) research of supplementary programs, or (d) rejection of the model or promising practice and research of new whole school improvement approaches. Keep in mind that many external whole school improvement models require a certain percentage of a school's faculty to vote in favor of adopting the model.
- Send a thank you letter to the school.

Appendix C: Sample Letter to School

Reading Elementary School
123 Learning Ave.
Learning, XO 98765

May 10, 2006

Dear Principal Jefferson:

Thank you for taking time to speak with me about the XYZ improvement approach (or XYZ promising practice). As per our conversation, I am writing on behalf of my school, John Doe Elementary, to request a visit to your school to learn more about the XYZ approach and the school improvement process. Doe Elementary has recently begun to make plans for improvement, and as part of that process, we are considering the XYZ approach. We hope to improve parent involvement, decrease discipline problems, and raise student achievement. We are looking for evidence-based promising practices to help us meet these goals.

Members of our school planning team would participate in the visit to your school. This seven-member group includes the principal, teachers, and support staff.

During a visit to your school, my team hopes to learn about:

- Your school and neighborhood profile, including history, student population, description of the XYZ approach, other initiatives at the school, and recent student performance. (Note: Do you have any materials that provide this information? I would like to distribute the materials as background information about the school and the approach to my team members before the visit and would greatly appreciate any materials that you may be able to provide.)
- How you and the faculty feel the XYZ approach has helped to change your school. What noticeable improvement your school has made as a result of adopting the approach. How XYZ complements other initiatives at your school.
- How staff has reacted or adapted to the approach.
- What challenges your school has faced or continues to face in the implementation of the approach. How your school is working to overcome those challenges.
- What process is followed for evaluating the effectiveness of the approach and how those evaluations are used to guide planning.
- What the administration and faculty members feel have been the most important factors contributing to the success that your school has experienced.
- How support staff have contributed to implementing the approach.
- How your school or the approach has involved parents and the community in the improvement efforts.

Also, my team would like to:

- Observe the XYZ 90-minute reading block
- Observe at least two full blocks of classroom instruction
- Meet with those teachers and other staff after the observations for a discussion and to ask clarifying questions
- Speak with and pose questions to teachers, support staff, and students in a private setting
- Speak to faculty members who are involved in the XYZ parent–family involvement component

We would like to visit for 1 full school day in late October or early November. We have identified several possible dates: October 26 or 27 or November 4 or 9. I will contact you so that we can identify which of these dates would be best for you, your staff, and your students.

Since we hope to stay for the entire school day, I would also like to discuss possible arrangements for lunch. We are willing to pay for lunch provided by your cafeteria or to make other arrangements to eat lunch on-site. I look forward to speaking with you about this request.

I will contact you so that we can finalize the date and begin planning the structure of our visit. In the meantime, if you have any questions or concerns, I can be reached at 123-456-7890 during the day or at 098-765-4321 after 5 p.m. or through e-mail at jsmith@johndoe.edu.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Ms. Jane Smith
Title I Coordinator
John Doe Elementary School
555 New Jersey Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20001

Appendix D: Sample Visit Briefing Packet

John Doe Elementary School

Memorandum

To: Visit-Team Members
From: Jane Smith, Visit Coordinator
Date: October 15, 2006
Subject: Information About the Visit to Reading Elementary School

In final preparation for our visit to **Reading Elementary School**, in **Learning, XO**, on **Thursday, October 26, 2006**, the following packet includes background information on Reading Elementary School and the XYZ approach. Please take time to review this information before our visit so that we are all ready to make the most of this opportunity.

This packet includes:

- Demographic and test score information on Reading Elementary School (Source: XO State Department of Education Web site.)
- Several local news articles that provide a history of the school, an overview of the school's improvement process, and information about the school's implementation of the XYZ approach. *(Sample not included in this guide.)*
- Background material that was provided by the developers of the XYZ approach. *(Sample not included in this guide.)*
- Directions to Reading Elementary School. *(Sample not included in this guide.)*
- A list of our team's expectations for the visit.
- A list of the focus roles that we assigned to each team member at our last meeting.
- An agenda for our visit.
- Final location and time for our debriefing meeting.

Reminders:

1. We are scheduled to meet from 5:00–5:30 p.m. on Monday, October 23, 2006, in the cafeteria at John Doe Elementary School for a final review of our plans for the visit to Reading Elementary School. I look forward to seeing you then.
2. We are scheduled to meet immediately after our visit at 4:30 p.m. on Thursday, October 26, 2006, at the Relax Restaurant to debrief and plan next steps. The restaurant is located directly across the street from Reading Elementary School.

**Reading Elementary School
Learning, XO**

Principal Elizabeth Jefferson

Approach XYZ

Total Number of Students 560 (May 1, 2005)

Demographics (October 2004–June 2005)

Mobility: 30%
 Free/Reduced-Price Lunch: 99.5%
 LEP: 9.6%
 White (Non-Hispanic): 1.6%
 Black (Non-Hispanic): 80.5%
 Hispanic: 17.4%
 Asian or Native American: 0.5%
 Percentage of Days That Students Attended in 2004–2005: 88.9%
 XO State Test Results (Source: XO State Department of Education Web site)

Third-Grade Reading:

Percentage of Students At or Above State Minimum Level

	2002–2003	2003–2004	2004–2005
Reading ES	48.8	68.8	71.1
Similar Schools	60.6	61.1	56.7
City	64.1	69.4	64.9

Third-Grade Mathematics:

Percentage of Students At or Above State Minimum Level

	2002–2003	2003–2004	2004–2005
Reading ES	86.7	91.3	86.7
Similar Schools	90.0	88.9	84.4
City	91.0	92.0	89.3

Fifth-Grade Writing:

Percentage of Students At or Above State Minimum Level

	2002–2003	2003–2004	2004–2005
Reading ES	55.6	85.5	76.8
Similar Schools	82.6	83.4	79.3
City	84.2	87.0	85.8

Overview

Located in central Learning, most of the students at Reading Elementary School (ES) live in nearby public housing projects, and 99.5% of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. In 2004, Reading ES did not make AYP for the third consecutive year and was identified for restructuring. That year, the local school superintendent placed the district's schools that did not make AYP for 3 consecutive years under the superintendent's control. All schools in the district receive Title I funds and special resources and support from district staff. The district's intense level of personal attention and commitment has been key to the renewed success of its schools. Moreover, by combining Title I funds with existing funds, these schools have been able to fund important professional development and staff positions. In the past year, several restructured schools have met AYP for the first time.

Since the Reading ES staff redesigned the school and adopted the XYZ approach, test scores have improved significantly. In the first year alone, the school experienced a 20% increase in the number of third graders who met AYP in reading. The state has removed Reading ES from its list of low-performing schools, and the education commissioner has cited Reading ES as one of most improved schools in the city.

Overall, XYZ has helped Reading ES maintain an intense focus on reading. The school also uses Title I funds to provide professional development. Specialists in math, literacy, and media or technology teach in teams with classroom teachers and provide on-site staff training that is tailored to the faculty's needs. A full-time staff person provides further on-site staff development and resources. The specialists and staff participate in the school's Core Planning Team. The team meets weekly to share observations and to plan approaches around specific needs of staff and students.

Reading ES has also reduced its class size and implemented after-school approaches to provide students who are falling behind in literacy and math with the extra instruction that they need to catch up. Their extended school day also includes enrichment for advanced students. After-school activities, such as test preparation workshops, also involve parents.

Goals for our Visit

In our meeting last month, we agreed on the following goals for our visit to Reading ES:

- Gain information about how the school community has worked together with administrators and school board members to develop an improvement plan and adopt XYZ
- Observe the XYZ reading approach in action, especially the 90-minute reading block
- Learn about the parent–family involvement component of the XYZ approach
- Find out whether XYZ provides staff with tools and practices to improve classroom management and student discipline
- Investigate costs of the approach and learn how Reading ES has financed XYZ
- Determine whether the XYZ approach provides sufficient staff development and ongoing support prior to and during implementation
- Examine the extent to which the XYZ approach helps the school build internal capacity to sustain the school improvement process

Agenda

7:50–8:00 a.m.	Meet outside the front doors of Reading ES for a last-minute check. Distribute visitors' passes.
8:00–8:30 a.m.	Meet with principal and XYZ facilitator. Brief overview of XYZ implementation at Reading ES. Some time for questions and answers.
8:30–10:00 a.m.	Observe 90-minute XYZ reading block. Team will visit three classrooms to see how this block operates across the school.
10:15–11:30 a.m.	Observe classroom.
11:35 a.m.–12:15 p.m.	Have lunch in school cafeteria with administrators, teachers, and students.
12:25–1:40 p.m.	Observe classroom.
1:45–2:30 p.m.	Have discussion with teachers and support staff whose classrooms we observed.
2:35–3:00 p.m.	Have discussion with Reading ES parent advisory group.
3:00–3:15 p.m.	Break.
3:15–4:15 p.m.	Wrap up discussion with principal, XYZ facilitator, and other key staff members.
4:30 p.m.	Debrief and plan for meeting at Relax Restaurant.

Roles of Team Members

In our meeting last month, we assigned the following roles for our visit to Reading ES:

- **Sloan Anderson, Reading Teacher and Curriculum Advisor:** Will observe and gather information on the XYZ reading approach and will examine how XYZ shapes and coordinates the school's curriculum.
- **Alicia Cameron, John Doe Principal:** Will observe and gather information on classroom management and student discipline. Will also consider whether XYZ approach aligns with state and district requirements.
- **Paula Iris, PTA President:** Will observe and gather information on parent and community involvement.
- **Theresa Knoll, Support Staff Representative:** Will observe and gather information on the roles of support staff in the classroom and throughout the school as a whole. Will focus on the roles and perspectives of support staff in the XYZ approach.
- **Jerry Nelson, Board of Education Member:** Will observe and gather information on union-management cooperation and planning and community involvement in the improvement process. Will also examine the administrative decisions that might be required to successfully support implementation of XYZ.
- **Jane Smith, Title I Coordinator:** Will observe and gather information on costs of the approach and staff development, including time required, topics covered, support needed, professional development, and teacher feedback.

Appendix D: Acronyms

AFT	American Federation of Teachers
AIR	American Institutes for Research
CSR	Comprehensive school reform
CSRQ Center	Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center
NCEA	National Center for Educational Accountability
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
OESE	Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
PPI	Promising Practices Initiative
WWC	What Works Clearinghouse